



# WHAT DOES GOVERNMENT DO?

Think about the sidewalks and roads that link our neighbourhoods and communities together. Consider the complex planning needed to provide us with fire protection and public health care. Look at the laws that define what behaviour is acceptable in society. These and other features of our society are not just an accident or coincidence. Their presence is the direct result of government.

But what is “government”? Several years ago, Ricker, Saywell, and Skotch put forth a definition of government. It is still relevant today:

*Government is the machinery that individuals set up to enable them to do with others what they cannot do on their own<sup>1</sup>.*

From laws that protect society from theft to policies providing everyone with health care and K-12 education, governments ideally will act in ways that help society achieve its goals.

So we now know what government is. But *who* is government?

In Canada, our governments are an extension of all of us—the people. Citizens democratically choose governments to reflect our wishes for our society. This means that government must respond to the will of the people.

Because citizens choose governments, it is the responsibility of every citizen to be well-informed. After all, when we are better informed, we choose better governments.

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## Distribution of Government Responsibilities

To understand how we, as citizens, can become involved in creating the rules that govern our lives, it is important to understand that each level of government has different responsibilities. In addition to First Nations’ governments, there are three levels of government in Saskatchewan: Federal, Provincial, and Municipal.

The **Federal Government** has power over areas that are of interest to the country as a whole. This includes:

- banking
- criminal law
- broadcasting and telecommunications
- the RCMP
- air transportation
- national defence
- national parks
- international trade
- postal service
- oceans and fisheries

**Provincial Governments** have power over areas that directly affect the well-being of the province. This includes:

- education
- highways
- health care
- forestry and mining
- agriculture
- labour standards

1. Ricker, Saywell, Skotch. (1982). *How are we governed in the '80s?*



# WHAT DOES GOVERNMENT DO? ...continued

**Municipal Governments** are given their powers from the province. Through bylaws and other actions, municipal powers include:

- health and safety of its citizens
- activities in or near public places
- vehicle, bicycle, and pedestrian traffic
- streets and roads
- property taxes
- utilities such as water
- sewage and garbage disposal
- local police and fire protection
- parks and playgrounds
- building codes
- public transit
- nuisances such as noise and litter
- store hours
- curfews
- animals and dangerous dogs

**First Nations Governments** have a structure and authority that differs from community-to-community. It ranges from minimal governance to self-government agreements with Canada.



**THINK**

## Citizen Interests & Issues

1. For each of the following situations determine if it is a Federal, Provincial, or Municipal responsibility.
  - a) You want to build a garage in your backyard.
  - b) There is a dog in the neighbourhood that always bites people's heels.
  - c) Ms. Mabel thinks that the picture on the ten dollar bill is poorly drawn.
  - d) The highway to the next town is full of potholes.
  - e) The intersection of Main Street and First Avenue has poor visibility because of overgrown trees.
  - f) The fire department was slow to respond to a garbage bin fire.
  - g) The community's drinking water tastes like chlorine.
  - h) A local curfew requires all children 16 and under to be indoors by 9:00pm.
  - i) The minimum wage is too low.
  - j) There are not enough doctors in your community.
  - k) The community's bike paths are poorly designed.
2. Think about three issues you face in your life. For each, answer the following.
  - a) What is the issue?
  - b) Why is it an issue in your life?
  - c) How does this issue affect others in the community?
  - d) Does government play a role? If so, which level of government?